

ILLINOIS EDITION

# TOP AGENT

MAGAZINE

Are You A  
VALUE-ADDED  
AGENT?

*Keeping  
in touch*

How to Stay in Your  
Clients' Lives for the  
Long Haul

TURN OPEN  
HOUSES INTO  
DESTINATIONS

COVER STORY

JOE  
PIRAINO

FEATURED AGENT

JILL GIORNO

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JOE PIRAINO



JILL GIORNO

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## 4 Easy Ways to Redecorate Your Office that Will Boost Morale & Impress Clients

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Your office is a battle-station of sorts. It's where you field business, launch your communications, and make the magic of your enterprise happen on a daily basis. While you'll certainly need to have all the functional elements of an office in order to get your work done—desk, chair, internet—have you really considered the physical environment you've cultivated in the process? Think of it this way: working all day in a windowless, poorly lit room

wouldn't exactly inspire productivity or morale, would it?

The fact is humans take all sorts of social, behavioral, and emotional cues from our environments. And as a real estate professional, you likely already understand the power of the visual and the benefits of making a good impression. With all that in mind, how can you redecorate or retool your

office space in a way that will boost your mood, productivity, and client relationships? For inspiration, here are a few tips to keep in mind as you consider the ambiance and environment in which you conduct business.

## 1. A little goes a long way

Redecorating your office space doesn't have to break the bank. Style and décor are often about tiny details adding up to make an overall impression. For instance, paint color, plant life, and lighting are all straightforward ways to rejuvenate a room without spending a fortune. Have dark, drab walls? Consider springing for a lighter, fresher color that will breathe new life into your space. Have bare window sills or empty corners? Buying and potting a few low-maintenance plants like ferns or succulents can add freshness and pops of color to a sparse room. Rely on fluorescent lighting? Consider sprucing up your space with a few well-chosen floor and table lamps that add accents of taste while warming up the tone in your office. A few intuitively placed items can inspire renewed energy.

## 2. Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

One way to make a big change in your office environment without spending a penny is to declutter and reorder. Let's say you have rows upon rows of crowded, bulky filing cabinets. Try digitizing your records and cut the clutter, opening up square footage in the process. Maybe your desk has faced the same wall for years. Have you considered rearranging your existing furniture and décor? Just by reorganizing the flow of your workspace, you can give your office the cheapest face-lift possible. You can also make work areas flow more intuitively, based on the processes and collaboration you've adapted to over time.

## 3. Think like a client

Imagine you're walking into the office for the first time. As a client, what details would stick out? What red flags would come to mind? While *you're* used to working in the same space every day, clients are coming into your office with no set expectations. With that in mind, complete a walkthrough of your office area to address eye sores, clutter, and whatever feels unprofessional or amateur. Half the battle of redecorating your space is finding opportunities and seeing things anew, instead of being content with the status quo.

## 4. Build out your brand

Redecorating your space is about aesthetics, but it's also about creating a unifying setting for your professional brand. If you're catering to luxury clientele, it makes sense that your office space should appear elegant, high-end, and sophisticated. If you're selling second homes out in the country, perhaps a more rugged but well-curated ambiance would set the right tone for your services. Maybe you're courting the Millennial market or touting your tech-forward approach to real estate. In that case, a modern, sleek, progressive layout would speak to your company's values and culture. Whatever the case may be, think of your office environment as an extension of your brand that communicates with clients, motivates your team, and sets the tone for your day-to-day operations.

Even if decorating isn't exactly in your wheelhouse, there are plenty of simple and philosophical shifts you can make to your space that will maximize your presence and productivity. What's more, real estate is a business built on relationships—so it doesn't hurt to create an office where clients are comfortable and confident in the environment you've built.

# Are You a Value-Added Agent?



I'll bet if I asked ten real estate agents, all ten would answer 'yes' to that question. Yet, when I ask agents how they are value-added, they say things like:

- I communicate regularly with my clients.
- I have a written listing presentation.
- I am honest.
- I am trustworthy.

Are these 'value-added' attributes? Or, does the client expect these attributes and services?

Are these exceptional services or average services? I'm writing this article at the beginning of a New Year. It's a perfect time to re-assess your professionalism and master being that 'value-added' agent.

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## Client Expectations are Higher than Ever

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Unfortunately, too many real estate agents assume they are 'value-added' because they are providing the services they want to provide—

the services they think the client values. However, there's a real client out there, and the client has different expectations. How do I know that? Because so few agents regularly survey their clients. In fact, when I'm speaking to an audience, I survey them, and find that less than 25 percent gather after-sale surveys! So, the majority of agents don't know if the services they are providing are average or exceptional.

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## Why Bother Being Exceptional?

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- Because you want to set yourself apart.
- You want to create client loyalty.
- You want to create at least 50 percent of your business from client referrals (the latest National Association of Realtors survey Profile of Members found that the average Realtor got only 18 percent of their business from referrals. That's a hard and expensive way to run a real estate business!
- Because you want to run a more pleasant, profitable business.

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## Four Actions Value-Added Agents Take

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How can you identify value-added agents? By their actions. Here are four actions I believe show agents that are above just 'average'. The principle here is:

**Watch the actions,  
not the words.**

If I were a manager, or a seller or a buyer, and I wanted to find a value-added agent, here's what I would look for:

### 1. Has a database and populates it

This agent is committed long-term to his clients and to his business. He uses a contact management program (CRM) to manage 'leads', so none are lost — and clients do not feel neglected. After all, it takes much longer today to convert a 'lead' to a sale than it used to take. Actively using and maintaining a CRM means the agent is committed to forming long-term professional relationships over time.

Other demonstrable actions concerning the agent's CRM are:

- Has a rapid-response method to deal with Internet inquiries and other inquiries via email. (The average client expects a response within eight hours—but a recent survey showed the average agent responded in 50 hours!).
- Has a method to follow up on all leads until they 'buy or die'. As a client, that means I won't get lost. As a seller, it means my agent will follow up with all leads and give it 100 percent to sell my home.

### 2. Invests in the technology and follow-up pros have

This agent makes every decision based on their vision of their career at least three to five years in the future. For example, instead of selling someone a house anywhere just to get a sale, my value-added agent sells only in an area they define as their 'target area'. That way, they'll get known, and can build on their reputation.

The value-added agent has the 'guts' to turn down business! Because they care more about the well-being of the client than getting one grimy commission check, they learn to

‘tell the truth attractively’, and work harder to retain the client than to make one commission.

### 3. Works for referrals, not just sales

I said the agent learns to ‘tell the truth attractively’, even if the buyer or seller may not want to hear it. For example, if it’s in the best interests of the seller to list their home at a lower price, the value-added agent has the strategies and the statistics to prove that the seller won’t be well served by pricing higher.

And, this value-added agent has the intestinal fortitude to walk away if they know the home will not sell at the client’s desired price (but doesn’t have to too many times because they create a stellar reputation amongst their clientele).

### 4. Keeps the buyers and sellers’ best interests in mind

Our value-added agent makes every decision to grow trust, not just to make a fast buck. For example, the agent sits down with a prospective couple and finds out they can’t purchase right away and creates a plan with them to save for their down payment. Then, the agent keeps in touch over a period of months, offering helpful information and market updates.

In other words, this agent practices seller or buyer agency representation, not ‘agent agency’!

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## Adding those Client Benefits to your Dialogue

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Of course, it’s not enough to actually take these actions. You need to explain to the client why these actions are in their best interests, and how you stand apart from most agents by employing them. Why? Because your client won’t know you run your business so professionally. And, the client probably doesn’t know most agents don’t run their businesses this way!

**TIP:**  
**Always show your clients, don’t just tell them. You do have a Professional Portfolio and evidence on your website, don’t you?**

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## Put Yourself to the Test

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How many of these actions do you exhibit? What do you want to work on to become a true ‘value-added’ agent?

**TIP:**  
**Managers, give your agents a ‘test’ on these four points. How many pass?**



Carla Cross, CRB, MA, President of Carla Cross Seminars, Inc., and Carla Cross Coaching, is an international speaker specializing in real estate management and business planning for all real estate professionals. Her seven internationally published books, including *Up and Running in 30 Days*, and 20 agent and management programs have helped thousands of real estate professionals to greater productivity and profitability. Reach Carla at 425-392-6914 or [www.carlacross.com](http://www.carlacross.com).

# TOP AGENT

MAGAZINE



JOE  
PIRAINO



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*Top Agent Joe Piraino describes his journey into real estate as the best kind – From Childhood.*

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Joe Piraino describes his journey into real estate as the best kind – from childhood. “When my brother and I were kids, we grew up in a developing community, with new homes being built. My brother and I would walk through the homes after the construction teams left for the day, and pretended we were building and staging the homes ourselves. It probably wasn’t the best idea because of safety,” he admits now,

“but we never really knew that we were setting the stage for our future careers.”

After that, Joe and his brother got into corporate careers, and a few years ago, Joe says he called his brother to let him know he was finally taking the plunge into real estate. “He said, ‘No way!’” Joe recalls. It turned out his brother was doing the exact same thing at the



same time. “It was so cool how it all turned out,” Joe says. Today, Joe has been in real estate since 2017, serving the Chicagoland area. Joe works solo, though he’s open to the idea of having a team in the future. He says that while repeat service is still growing, he sees

about 85% referral business, thanks to social media and his marketing.

Why do people come back and refer Joe so much? “I think they like me and my unique approach,” he says. “The cool part about this



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*“The cool part about this business is that I get to work with great people and people get to choose someone they like to work with.”*

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business is that I get to work with great people and people get to choose someone they like to work with.” Joe says his success comes, at least partially, from his different approach to marketing. “I like to have fun with it and really develop a customized approach for each client,” he says. “There are a lot of stresses that come with buying and selling a home. Being knowledgeable and communicating the process is important, but adding a little fun and personalization makes it exciting for sellers and buyers and it makes it exciting for me, too. The entire process is customized for each client and it

becomes an experience as opposed to a transaction.” An example includes a billboard with Joe’s information, proclaiming that he’s the “#1 REALTOR®” with an asterisk, which notes “according to my mother.” This sense of humor has worked out for Joe, though, and the billboard alone attracted significant attention and business.

Staying in touch is also important to Joe, who maintains relationships with past clients via social media as well as community events and direct mailings. He also runs contests and promotions for clients that also support



local businesses. When it comes to marketing, Joe hosts open houses, and he makes them memorable and engaging for the community. Working with and meeting people is Joe's favorite part of the business, as is running into past clients in the community. "What REALTORS® really do is connect people," he says. "Sure, there are other things, but we are connecting people who have a common interest, and that's the home and the community."

Joe is also passionate about his community, working with North Central College's sports marketing class, helping students learn the ins and outs of marketing planning. This is just one of the many things he participates in around the community. When he's not hosting events in the community or working with clients, Joe enjoys spending time with his family, who just welcomed their first child five months ago.



For the future, Joe is simply interested in continuing to grow his business and has been considering developing a larger team one day. “I think that would be fun and rewarding,” he says. “As I continue to grow in real estate, I also want to teach the skills I’ve learned.” He’s

already helping others get into real estate, too. He also has some advice for anyone involved in real estate in any aspect: “Just enjoy the process. As with anything, there are things that can be stressful...but in general, try to enjoy the process. It can be a very fulfilling and rewarding career.”

To learn more about Joe Piraino,  
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or call (630) 202-5918



*Keeping  
in Touch-*

## HOW TO STAY IN YOUR CLIENTS' LIVES FOR THE LONG HAUL

One sign of a great real estate agent is their long list of loyal clients following. Part of achieving a great referral base is being a great realtor during the transaction. But, that's only half of the work. To truly be your client's realtor for life and keep them coming back to you as well as referring others to you, you have to stay in their lives past the transaction. Keeping in touch with your past clients can be one of the most important parts of your business, and one that many realtors tend to push to the wayside.

Do you stay in your client's lives, or do you disappear? People refer people that they feel they know well and that they trust, people they consider friends. However, earning and keeping your client's trust involves maintaining a delicate balance with how much you contact them. Experts recommend reaching out to your clients at least quarterly. But, it's not just about how often you stay in touch. You also need to be mindful about how you are reaching out to them. Here are some tips on how to keep in touch with your clients for the long haul:

## INDIVIDUAL PERSONAL CONTACT

One of the best ways to keep in touch with your clients is to simply give them a call every once in a while. Follow up and see how your clients are doing. Offer them assistance if they need it. Personalized contact helps to ensure that you remain as important to your clients long after the sale as you were during the transaction. Giving your clients a call on special occasions such as birthdays or holidays also makes for a great personal touch.

Of course, nothing beats face-to-face contact. Stopping by to say hello can be a great way to keep in contact. An even better way to catch up and maintain that friendship is to set up a lunch or coffee date with past clients. Giving individual clients your undivided attention goes a long way towards maintaining that bond you formed during the transaction and earning your client's loyalty and trust. Interactions like this make a lasting impression on your clients.

Of course, many busy REALTORS® may not have time to follow up with every client one-on-one. A great way to still give personal attention to your clients without meeting each and every one for lunch is to throw a client appreciation party. This allows you to get in some face-to-face time with each client and make sure they all get your undivided attention and quality time to catch up with you, even if it's only for a short time.

Now, if you have a lot of past clients, this can be difficult to manage during one party. One way to get around the numbers problem is to organize smaller events based on client's interests. Instead of throwing one giant party, host a pool party for the families with kids or a wine and cheese get together for single clients. Hosting special events like these ones goes a long way towards keeping your contact with past clients more personalized and setting you apart from those businesses that simply send them a calendar once a year.

## PROVIDE CLIENTS WITH USEFUL NEWS

One way that many REALTORS® keep in touch with their clients is by sending them newsletters. This form of contact can be a double-edged sword. You want to make sure you provide them with useful information that reminds them of your value as a real estate professional. Otherwise your communication will amount to nothing more than spam, and clients will think of you less as a trusted friend and more as a nuisance salesperson.

Clients react much more positively to communication containing information that is pertinent to their lives. Update your clients on what is going on in their local community and

housing market. Demonstrate your knowledge about the community and the things that are important to your clients. Include information about local cultural events, community news, housing statistics, information on the mortgage market, home maintenance advice, home design tips, and anything else that your clients will find personally useful. Your clients will always be interested in value.

## SEND CLIENTS MEMORABLE AND PERSONAL CARDS

Sending your clients cards related to important events in their lives and letting them know that you remember those events and care will go a long way towards building and maintaining a close personal relationship with them. You want to make sure your cards stand out, though. Sending popular holiday cards can be a mistake, as they will most likely get lost amongst all of your clients other holiday cards and will be quickly forgotten. Instead send something more personal such as:

### **HOME ANNIVERSARY CARDS:**

Send cards to each client on the anniversary of the closing of their home.

### **CONGRATULATORY CARDS:**

Remember important events such as wedding anniversaries, graduations, new babies, etc.

### **SPECIAL BIRTHDAY CARDS:**

Instead of just sending your typical birthday card, add something special to yours that will stand out. Include a \$1 scratch off ticket or a \$5 gift certificate to Starbucks. Make sure to include a handwritten personal note.

## GIVE CLIENTS AN UNUSUAL GIFT

Make sure the gifts you send your past clients stand out. Send your past clients an odd gift at the beginning of the year or on a holiday. Think outside the box and send things like funny magnets, customized mugs, a personalized piece of wall décor, and other fun and unusual items. A great way to make your gift stand out even more is to include a funny note with it that will catch their attention as well as make them think of you. For example, one cute idea is to send clients a bag of popcorn with the note, “Real estate is popping, give me a call.” You could send a bag of goldfish with a note attached that says, “I’m fishing for your referrals.” Get creative and have a little fun with it, your clients will notice and remember you for it.

## TAKE ADVANTAGE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS



Social networking sites make staying in contact with past clients in a more informal and friendly basis much easier. Connect with your past clients on Facebook. This will help you stay up to date on the important things happening in your past clients' lives. In return, it provides you a great platform for keeping those past clients up to date with what is going on in your business as well as keep in contact in a more informal manner. Use Facebook to remind past clients to check their basement after a heavy rain or that they can contact you for help during tax time.

You can even organize your contacts on Facebook into customized lists such as "past clients," "industry contacts," etc. This will help you better manage your Facebook contacts. This will also allow you to view specific news feeds based on these lists and send messages to a particular list of contacts. Don't forget about the many other social networking sites such as Twitter or LinkedIn either. Utilize this technology to drive personal contact with your clients.

## STAY ORGANIZED

No matter how you choose to keep in contact with past clients, make sure to be consistent. Consistency will help you stay organized and diligent about reaching out to your past clients regularly. A tool used by many real estate professionals to stay organized is a customer relationship management solution. Whether you use one that is online or a computer software program, this will help you stay organized when managing your contacts and allow you to set notifications to alert you when you need to contact certain clients, send out gifts, plan a client appreciation event, and many other things throughout the year.

Staying organized and consistent in your contact with past clients will help you continue to build and manage your referral base, as well as open the door to repeat and referral business.

# TOP AGENT MAGAZINE

## JILL GIORNO

Jill Giorno has had a unique journey into the world of real estate, and has a varied career background. She co-owned a small, boutique gym for four years, and sold her half of the business to her partner at the end of 2016. Naturally, Jill wondered what her next steps were going to be, until one of the gym's regulars, a busy real estate agent, suggested getting her real estate license. "I did about a week of soul-searching, talked to my husband...and I decided to just go for it," Jill says, "and I really haven't looked back."



Jill has now been in real estate since March 2017. She works with the Makinney Group, a four-agent team along with an operations manager and social media manager with @Properties, serving the Chicago western suburbs. Within the past year, she's also been seeing an uptick in referral business. "The easiest part for me was that being a small business owner, I had a really nice network before I got into real estate," Jill says. "Sometimes it's hard for new agents to get that going, so that's what made it somewhat easier for me to get started. It's been really nice to have people refer me to others who I don't know, and then those who are new to me to refer me. It's starting to cycle."

But Jill's success with her clients isn't just because of her established community relationships. "I'm honest," she says, "I'm huge on communication. [Clients] know that they won't be looking for me, but that I'm there for them. They trust me. My background in social work has helped me in real estate because it can sometimes be a really emotional process. And I'm data-driven. If I need to have a serious conversation, it's not subjective, it's based on data and research." She's also good at finding the silver linings in all situations, and describes herself as an upbeat person. "I really take pride in communicating and in appreciating my clients," she says, "and I think it really shows." Her client appreciation is also something she actively works on, sending out birthday and anniversary cards, personalized texts and calls, and client appreciation gifts.

Thanks to working with a team and with @Properties, Jill is able to make use of @Properties' proprietary agent app, which allows agents to share listings with one another. Her team is also big on social media, including LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. "I love social media and create posts for my clients, plus I share what our social media manager creates as well. It's not newspapers anymore, it's more yard signs, social media, real estate websites, and other agents who find homes for their buyers."

"I love the fact that I can keep moving. I'm a mover and a shaker; I don't like sitting at a desk," Jill says. "Real estate is really nice because I can be out and about, taking people to see places. I've never had a career where there was closure. I was in fitness and social work, where there was never really an end, it was more continual, so I like being able to help someone from the beginning of the process all the way to the closing table."

Jill is also active in her community. She takes part in the No Frills Fun Run, which is a local non-for-profit organization that helps a family in need each year. Recently, her family made meals for a local soup kitchen. Lastly, her real estate group also reaches out to the community to see how they can help others as well. When not working, Jill still enjoys working out, and still holds a personal training certification. She also plays hockey, loves traveling, and spending time with her family and friends.

Jill's plans for the future are simple: "Keep it growing! There are a lot of things I've done in my past, but this is definitely the career that I'm going to be doing for a very long time," she says. "I'm a lifelong learner, and I love challenges and learning from challenges. I'm overall just very appreciative of my clients and my family, and everything I've ever done has been helping others, and that's what's most important to me."

To learn more about Jill Giorno, please email [jgiorno@atproperties.com](mailto:jgiorno@atproperties.com), visit [atproperties.com/jillgiorno](http://atproperties.com/jillgiorno), or call (630) 220-7199

## Graham Harrop Cartoons



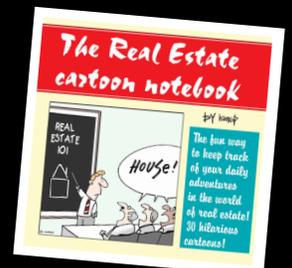
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# Turn Open Houses into Destinations

People are busy. Even those who are actively looking to buy a house or want to learn about the market for a future purpose have busy schedules. But with bit of added time, creativity and investment in making open house into destinations, you'll see greater turnout. And we all know that greater turnout increases the likelihood of offers.

There are several creative ways to hold an open house with a mindset of hospitality and with the goal of providing something of value to each person who attends.

## **The neighbors-only open house**

Some agents embrace the “nosy neighbor” concept as a benefit, not an eye-rolling challenge. With his client’s permission, Wesley Peters, a Keller Williams broker in the Baltimore Metro Area, often gets the neighbors together before a home hits the market. “We invite other brokers, too, but we include as many neighbors as we can,” he says, explaining that he schedules these events for a Thursday or Friday evening, happy hour-style, rather than midday on a Sunday. They get a better turnout at 5:00 pm than

midday on a weekend when the neighbors are busy with their lives. In a relaxed setting, conversations flow, neighbors can mingle and catch up, and the buzz begins before the home is listed. In advance, prepare invitations and hand-deliver them to homes on the streets you and your client agree are best to include. The destination is the event; the value each attendee receives is the social interaction and the removal of any awkwardness over visiting their neighbor's house. Your client's benefit is the buzz.

### **A turnkey block party any time of year**

Once a property is listed, some agents take on the role of party planners. Certain streets or neighborhoods, they find, are perfect for low-key social occasions. In some place, such as neighborhoods with many young families, a bounce-house or games may even ramp up the fun factor. But the idea of a seemingly spontaneous block party during an open house can be easy to pull off, whether you're serving lemonade and cookies or coffee and pastries. The chance to meet prospective neighbors turns the event into a destination for both buyers and the neighbors; the value comes in buyers' ability to see how the neighbors interact. Your seller's benefit is that the grapevine will be filled with happy stories about their home. *Tips:* By keeping basic supplies in storage, you'll be ready for a pop-up block party any time. Promote this type of event with targeted social media marketing and fliers or postcards to communities within a short distance of your listing.

### **Invite other professionals**

It's common mortgage lenders to attend open houses. But why not provide even more value to people who attend? Chances are, you have more than a handful of professional partners who welcome an opportunity to join you at your open house. Consider inviting an interior designer, a contractor, a gardener, even a gardener or a painter. Invite them to your broker's open in advance or give them time to view the property

before the open house begins. Then encourage them to stroll the property during the open house or to sit with you. When visitors ask about needs or concerns they may have about the house – such as loan questions, the cost of improvements or upgrades or even remodeling – you'll be able to introduce them to an expert on the spot. For that matter, your invited pros don't even necessarily have to be in home-related businesses! Prospective buyers always want to know about the community when visiting open houses. Consider inviting representatives of community



organizations, like youth sports group or owners of mom-and-pop retailers to help your visitors get a feel for the neighborhood or town. For this type of open-house, prepare a flyer or card with your community contacts on it so visitors can leave with resources as well as information.

Open house should be about the buzz. They're about creating a conversation about your listing and making the home memorable to visitors. By giving people a unique experience they won't forget, you'll show your sellers how creative you are in meeting their needs.

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